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Counties **GOLIAD COUNTY**

EPA allows UEC to mine uranium in Goliad County

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After years of grappling, Uranium Energy Corp. has received the final permit necessary to begin uranium mining in Goliad County.

UEC is celebrating what it terms a victory while opponents of the plan for in situ mining in Goliad are looking around to decide their next strategy.

Harry Anthony, chief operating officer of UEC, said he was thrilled with the news.

"We are grateful the EPA recognizes that uranium is a safe, viable and clean energy source," Anthony stated in a press release. "Uranium production and nuclear power are an essential part of our country's overall energy policy and the Goliad project is a vital part of that effort."

After the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality granted permits for UEC, opponents from Goliad hoped the Environmental Protection Agency would rule against the mining.

On Wednesday, the federal agency announced its decision to grant an aquifer exemption permit for UEC, a Corpus Christi-based company that works in production, development and exploration of uranium.

"I'm very disappointed in the EPA. They know it harms the water and they won't do anything about it and neither will the TCEQ," Goliad County Commissioner Precinct 3 Jim Kreneck said.

After almost seven years and \$700,000 spent - roughly \$100 per person in Goliad County - Kreneck said he and those working with him were frustrated with the decision.

The aquifer exemption was the last permit needed by UEC. Now Goliad residents may turn to other legal avenues to see whether they can oppose the drilling, Kreneck said.

"The EPA was supposed to be taking care of the people and the environment," Kreneck said. "I thought we had a chance there, and it was going along very well when all of a sudden they came up with this. You never know who gets to who. You can't trust anyone anymore when it comes to money and power."

Raulie Irwin, a member of the Goliad County Groundwater Conservation District board of directors, said members aren't sure what their next step will be.

Irwin said they have been opposing UEC because of concerns for their groundwater. The in situ mining will be drawing water from the Evangeline Aquifer, the source of drinking water for the county, and Irwin said they are concerned their water source will be contaminated.

Irwin said county residents opposed the mining, alarmed by the fallout from uranium mining in Karnes County and more recently in Kleberg County.

Kleberg County didn't have any baseline testing of their wells, he said, a mistake Goliad Groundwater Conservation District would not repeat.

The groundwater district has been conducting baseline testing on wells near the proposed site since the legal battle began years ago. They'll continue running tests on the water twice a year, he said.

"It will never be the same here," Irwin said. "It already devastated Karnes County with open pit mining and our state dollars are still cleaning up Kleberg ... The same thing will happen here."

Anthony rebutted such concerns, arguing that the mining process, which involves using oxygenated water to capture the naturally occurring ore from water in the Evangeline Aquifer, is safe.

Mining uranium in Goliad will also help the country move toward energy independence, Anthony said.

"The United States has significant domestic uranium resources, but we currently import an overwhelming majority of our supply for nuclear power plants," he said. "Our goal is to turn that around and today's ruling by the EPA is a big step toward energy independence for America."

Matt Welch, spokesman for UEC, said the company would start construction on the site as soon as possible. The site, comprised of 1,421 acres in north Goliad County, should be finished by the end of next year when in situ mining will begin, Welch said.

Jim Blackburn, the Houston-based environmental lawyer representing Goliad residents, said they have other avenues to explore now that the EPA has handed down their ruling.

Blackburn said he believes the ruling was swayed by political motivations.

He filed a lawsuit against UEC after the TCEQ ruled in favor of the company in December 2010. The suit, which was in limbo while they waited for the EPA ruling, may now proceed in the state court, Blackburn said.

He said they could also file a federal lawsuit against the EPA. Blackburn said the EPA's aquifer exemption does not match the type of exemption issued by the TCEQ, opening another way to oppose UEC's mining operation from moving forward.

Blackburn said the fight isn't over.

"I'm convinced this is a bad project, and it deserves to be put on the shelf," Blackburn said. "We've been beaten politically, but I think we've beaten them scientifically and technically, so we'll see if we can beat them legally."